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ABSTRACT

The paper considers improved instructional design for learning handicapped students including the development of a cooperative and supportive school organization, the creation of appropriate classroom management systems, and the employment of active teaching strategies. A supportive school organization requires a positive interpersonal climate, placement of exceptional learners in the least restrictive environment, alternatives to normative testing and grading procedures, and a sound school-wide discipline code. Creation of an appropriate classroom management system requires establishment of positive interpersonal relationships between the teacher and students and among pupils. Also useful are attractive structured learning environments, behavior modification systems, and parent involvement. Ten active teaching strategies are: (1) clearly explain instructional objectives and tasks; (2) model and demonstrate assignments appropriately; (3) use "special" instructional materials and equipment; (4) ask questions and encourage responses; (5) present appropriate aids, prompts, and cues; (6) direct pupils in self-mediation and self-management; (7) praise pupil achievement; (8) provide correction and feedback; (9) record pupil performance using systematic token reinforcers and credits; and (10) show enthusiasm and interest in the lesson. A special education effective teaching lesson evaluation form is appended. (DB)

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IMPROVING THE EDUCATION OF LEARNING HANDICAPPED PUPILS

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The effectiveness of "special education" for learning handicapped pupils is being increasingly questioned by parents, school administrators and educational researchers. This is because of the lack of consensual definition and program rationale which has resulted in widely different placement policies, instructional approaches and evaluation procedures.

For example, Gartner and Lipsky (1987) have reported that more than eighty percent of the normal student population could be classified as learning disabled by one or more definitions presently in use. Furthermore, students identified as learning disabled cannot be shown to differ from other low achievers with regard to a wide variety of school related characteristics. However, these researchers state that in fifty recent studies comparing academic performance of mainstreamed and segregated students with handicapping conditions, the mean academic performance of the integrated group was in the eightieth percentile, while segregated students scored in the fiftieth percentile.

These studies also disclosed that the mildly handicapped pupils were taught very few high level cognitive skills and were seldom provided direct instruction with active learner response and teacher feedback. Surprisingly, these pupils also received a low frequency of contingent teacher attention.

It is apparent that such research continues to raise many justifiable questions about the efficacy of special education for the learning handicapped. The primary issue remains as to whether or not the "learning handicapped" are properly defined, and what can be done to effectively enhance their learning.

Recognizing Special Needs.

All students have some special learning needs and interests which must be recognized and adequately provided for if education is to be effective. If "regular" schooling was successful in this regard there would be no demand for "special education." Although surveys of the relevant literature by Jones and Jones (1986) disclose that it is possible for schools to meet individual pupil needs, it is apparent that many regular educational systems have not been able to appropriately provide for the diverse needs of their pupils as evidenced by frequent absenteeism, chronic discipline problems, alarming dropout rates, increasing failures and poor achievement scores.

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The learning handicapped are usually defined as those persons with essentially normal intelligence who have special problems in processing, comprehending, and utilizing information. This is most often evidenced by some significant discrepancy between observed ability and academic achievement in the basic skills. These problems are commonly attributed to organic neuro-psychological disabilities within the brain, which cannot be remediated or compensated for in the "regular" education program without supplementary special education.

Although this has been a widely questioned definition, it has been the prevailing one for administrative purposes. However, as Gartner, Lipsky and other critics have pointed out, considerable evidence indicates that most pupils actually placed in programs for the learning handicapped do not meet this criterion nor have they received the "special" education they really need.

Many learning handicapped students are truly "slow" learners who come from varied socio-economic backgrounds with multi-cultural values whose needs are seldom met through the regular system of school organization. These pupils enter school with numerous disadvantages and lack of motivation. When the system fails to recognize their special needs and interests and does not accommodate them, these children often become frustrated learners who suffer increasing failure and are finally "pushed out" of school. Organic factors, such as minimal brain dysfunction, may be the primary cause of severe learning problems in some of these pupils. However, it is increasingly evident (Coles, 1987) that most "learning handicaps" are due to dysfunctions within the educational system itself.

Whatever may be the cause of learning disabilities, it is apparent that both "regular" and "special" education must be changed to more adequately meet the needs of all pupils. Student, family, and community surveys and assessments of special needs and interests ought to be carefully conducted in all schools and special programs. Reasonable educational goals and objectives should then be established from the data obtained. Varied instructional systems must then be created to meet the needs of the population to be served. In this kind of school system both regular and special education would compliment each other with several kinds of group and individualized educational programs.

To be effective, the instructional design must include the development of a cooperative and supportive school organization, the creation of appropriate classroom management systems,. and the employment of active teaching strategies. The following sections of this paper will discuss how educators of learning handicapped pupils might help construct such a program.

Developing a Supportive School Organization.

An effective school involves teachers, administrators, students and parents in the development of a mutually supportive organizational structure and learning environment. There are several crucial factors involved which have significant impact on all concerned.

Extensive research by Brophy (1974) and his colleagues on effective learning has clearly established the primary importance of developing a positive interpersonal climate throughout the system. This is largely a function of administrative leadership which promotes open communication throughout the school, including cooperative and mutually beneficial endeavors between all teachers and their students.

Good practice, and Public Law 94-142, requires that exceptional learners be placed in the least restrictive environment. For the learning handicapped, this involves integration or "mainstreaming" within regular classrooms and programs. Most often, this requires arranging partial placement with regular teachers and the development of peer and cross-age tutoring throughout the school.

When students are placed in instructional groups according to their functional achievement level (instead of by age) in basic skills such as reading, language and mathematics, they receive more time and training on appropriate tasks and therefore experience less failure. Examples of functional achievement level programs for learning handicapped pupils have been described by Valett (1981) and others.

Since learning handicapped pupils perform poorly on most standardized tests they tend to receive low grades. An effective special education program provides several alternatives to normative testing and grading procedures as needed. This should include a grading policy with pupil progress reports based on the actual gains made toward achievement of written individual educational goals and objectives. This kind of supportive grade system helps to further motivation, accomplishment and self-esteem.

In order to succeed at their mission, schools must provide a relatively secure and stable learning environment. This requires the development of a sound school-wide discipline code with clearly stated rules of conduct with rewards and incentives for all concerned. It is especially important that learning handicapped pupils with behavior disorders be provided with this kind of structure and consistent management as they move about the school.

A supportive school organization also includes a carefully designed in-service training program for all personnel. Both regular and special educators should be knowledgable of each others programs and mutually cooperative plans and endeavors. New teachers must be provided with systematic help by supervisors and mentors, and involved in their own self-evaluation and professional development.

Creating an Appropriate Classroom Management System.

Within a supportive school organization a teacher can proceed to create an appropriate classroom management system for the learning handicapped. Numerous studies (Walker, Reavis, Rhode and Jensen, 1985) have specified the characteristics of effective management systems.

The single most important factor involved is the establishment of positive interpersonal relationships between the teacher and students, and between the pupils themselves. This most often results from teacher provision for special pupil needs and interests, reasonable expectations, personal praise and acknowledgment, and positive involvement with the class in a variety of interesting activities.

Learning handicapped students also benefit from attractive room environments that are fairly well structured with special study and learning centers, and regular daily schedules. To be truly effective, the special environment must include unique instructional materials and equipment not usually available in regular classrooms. For example, Vacc (1987), Long (1987) and others have demonstrated the efficacy of using computer programs, games, and wordprocessors with learning handicapped pupils. Biofeedback equipment, kinesthetic letters and manipulatives, electronic games and musical apparatus, and auditory and cognitive training devices, are illustrative of some of the proven special instructional materials which should be standard provision in such programs.

Most special education teachers also need to create a written behavior modification system that compliments the discipline code used throughout the school. Positive incentives such as praise, social privileges, and token economies which award points or credits for achievement and desirable behavior, must be clearly designed with student input and occasional revision.

Effective behavior management systems also involve parents in collaborative programs which foster a consistent approach to facilitating pupil learning. Like parents, teachers are powerful personal models whose behavior is often reflected by their students.

Appropriate classroom management systems for learning handicapped pupils teach and reinforce desirable behavior, and encourage the development of self-regulation. With increased structure, time on task, ongoing pupil appraisal and meaningful adjustments in instruction, these students can make significant gains in acquiring academic skills and self-discipline.

Employing Active Teaching Strategies.

Within the classroom, extensive research (Rosenshine, 1978; Emmer, Evertson and Anderson, 1980) has shown that the amount of time spent on direct instruction by the teacher, and the quality of such instruction, are primary factors in pupil achievement. Specifically, it is the way the teacher presents the material to be learned along with the use of varied instructional methods, with immediate correctional feedback to the student, that is essential for success. These crucial instructional factors might best be described as "active" teaching strategies.

Teachers can be taught to use these strategies and should be evaluated accordingly. For teachers of learning handicapped pupils, the following ten strategies, derived from the relevant literature on teacher effectiveness, should be consistently employed. These ten strategies are presented in a format that has been used in the direct supervision and evaluation of special educators. Upon completion of the lesson, each strategy is rated by assigning one of three possible letter values (E= Effective, NI= Needs Improvement, or I= Ineffective). Self-evaluations should be made by the teacher and compared with supervisory ratings.

DURING THIS LESSON THE TEACHER -

1. Clearly explained instructional objectives and Tasks.
2. Appropriately modeled and demonstrated assignments.
3. Used "special" instructional materials and equipment.
4. Asked questions and encouraged responses.
5. Presented appropriate aid, prompts and cues.
6. Directed pupils in self-mediation and self-management.
7. Praised pupil achievement.
8. Provided correction and feedback.
9. Recorded pupil performance using systematic token reinforcers and credits.
10. Showed enthusiasm and interest in the lesson.

The employment of these active teaching strategies can be enhanced through periodic evaluation with suggestions for improvement and supportive in-service training. Such evaluations are very effective when lessons are videotaped and contrasted with appropriate models.

Summary.

The education of all children can be significantly improved by redesigning the administrative and instructional system. This requires more responsible leadership from school boards, principals and supervisors. It also demands that professional standards, evaluation and accountability procedures be strengthened and supported financially by state and federal funds allocated for special education and school reform.

For example, state and local evaluators of special education programs should systematically ascertain pupil progress on individually designed educational goals and objectives as well as on standardized achievement tests of basic skills. Evaluators should also report on the effectiveness of the supportive school organization, classroom management systems, and the employment of active teaching strategies. In this way, both pupil progress and "system progress" can be determined, and deliberate efforts can be made for whatever changes may be necessary.

Exemplary instructional models can then be identified, rewarded, and used for inservice training. Schools and teachers desperately need well designed models and incentives for improvement. The inservice training of new teachers and administrators should involve considerable mentoring and supervision in the application of effective teaching practices.

Special education has long suffered from poor or inadequate administation and the use of marginally qualified "emergency" teachers. In most cases these practices have been detrimental to the education of both regular and learning handicapped students. It is obvious for instance, that other professional personnel (such as doctors, dentists, lawyers, engineers, etc.) are not allowed to practice until they meet required minimal standards. In the same sense of social responsibility, no special teacher should be allowed to begin to teach without evidence of having demonstrated minimum competence.

Similarly, incompetent special teachers and administrators who have been employed and received ample inservice training and support, should be dismissed. Those school programs which repeatedly fail to meet professional standards should be closed and financially penalized. It is far better to retain learning handicapped pupils in regular education, and to reform it accordingly, than to misplace these students in special classes and programs which may be highly detrimental to the entire system.

Constructive critics of educational reform must work to effectively redesign instructional programs. Both regular and special education for the learning handicapped can be improved through the employment of good standards and ongoing evaluation.

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- SPECIAL EDUCATION EFFECTIVE TEACHING LESSON EVALUATION -

Practicum Student Evaluated_____ Date_____
School/Program_____ Time observed_____

Lesson Topic_____
CSUF Supervisor/lesson evaluator_____
Ratings: E= Effective, NI= Needs Improvement, I= Ineffective

1. Clearly explained instructional objective/assignment. ____

2. Appropriately modeled/demonstrated assigned tasks. ____

3. Used "special" (concrete, etc.)instructional materials. ____

4. Asked questions and encouraged responses. ____

5. Presented appropriate aid, prompts and cues. ____

6. Directed pupils in verbal mediation & self-management. ____

7. Praised pupil achievement. ____

8. Provided corrective feedback. ____

9. Recorded pupil performance using systematic token reinforcement (points, monetary. grade, etc.) system. ____

10. Showed enthusiasm and interest in lesson. ____

Most Effective:

Least Effective:

Student Self-Evaluation & Comments:

Suggestions for Improvement:

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